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Review of Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 1297 pages, £44.05

Reviewed by Lucie Mercier

Abstract

The *Dictionary of Untranslables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, translation of the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies* (2004) is an invaluable resource for researchers in philosophy and the humanities more generally. Gathering the work of over 150 philosophers, this encyclopaedic project focuses on a series of philosophical terms that prove difficult to translate, disclosing their historical and linguistic intricacies. This review aims to provide a succinct analysis of its structure and rationale. It is suggested that a gap exists between the framing of the *Dictionary* in relation to a critical European cultural politics and the kind of philosophy it performs – a highly erudite contribution to both the history of philosophy and to philology. It is further argued that this does not get simpler with the edition of this book into English and the potential 'globalisation' of its scope.

Keywords: untranslatable**,** dictionary, Europe, history of philosophy, languages.

First published in 2004 under the heading of *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies, Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* is an original and hefty collaborative book standing on the crossroads of the history of philosophy, conceptual history and philology. Edited and coordinated by Barbara Cassin over an eleven-year period, this non-exhaustive dictionary or lacunary encyclopaedia focuses on philosophical terms that have proven, for linguistic, historical or philosophical reasons, difficult to translate. Its 400 entries intertwine semantics, the history of European languages and the philosophical 'moments' that have marked shifts and turns within the history of concepts. Following the Derridian injunction of philosophizing in 'more than one language' (*plus d'une langue*), the *Vocabulaire* reorganises the history of philosophy from the standpoint of *nexus* of equivocity, which function as 'envois', questions and, sometimes, as full-blown problematics in a Bachelardian or Deleuzian sense. Starting from the 'difficulty of translating in philosophy', Cassin frames this project as an alternative to both 'ontological nationalism' and 'logical universalism'. The aim of the Dictionary, she argues, is to 'constitute *a cartography of European and some other differences* by capitalizing on the knowledge and expertise of translators, and of those translators […] that we are as philosophers' (xx. emphasis mine). Thus she intends to strike two birds with one stone: the monolingual logic of 'analytic' philosophy and the nationalist hauntings of 'continental' philosophy.

One should not take the title of this book at face value. An 'untranslatable', Cassin explains, is not what *cannot* be translated, but is rather the '*sign* of the way in which, from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed.'(xvii) Whereas 'Dasein' stands as a paradigmatic case of linguistic untranslatability (195), at the opposite end of the spectrum terms such as 'Logos' have proven so equivocal and diversely translatable that they can only be conveyed through a multiplicity of terms (581). There is no single logic for the use of the notion of 'untranslatability' across the various articles: their unit of analysis range from singular terms (e.g. 'logos', 'Glück', 'Tatsache', 'species', 'moment' or 'samost') to entire networks of concepts (e.g. the array of variations upon the Kantian lexicon of 'phenomenon' *-Erscheinung, Schein, Phänomen, Manifestation, Offenbarung-).* The list of terms under scrutiny has been composed based on the specialisms of its main contributors, each philosopher addressing an aspect of translation that has arisen in her or his work, which explains its extraordinary density. The *Dictionary* is the surprising

product of the intensely topical character of these in-depth investigations and its collaborative, encyclopaedic drive.

To study words or networks of terms means adopting a specific focus on the history of philosophy, which runs counter to the retrospective narratives of 'inventions'. Privileging the figure of the 'philosopher as translator' (xx), the Dictionary gives a central role to authors such as Cicero, Boethius, Augustine, Averroës or Aquinas, who have translated, fashioned or refashioned the canon. Aside from an admirable work on Greek and Latin etymologies, the Dictionary emphasizes Late Antiquity and the Middle-Ages as historical pivots in the trajectories of philosophical terms. After all, as Rémi Brague reminds us, 'it is only fairly recently that the vernacular languages of modern Europe have been used as a medium for philosophy' (327). Given the crucial importance of the Aristotelian conceptual terminology for the Middle-Ages, a lot of attention is drawn to the terms that structured the logical and metaphysical apparatus flowing through Latin-speaking Europe: species, predication, analogy, supposition, universal. These articles are invaluable, not only for the ones interested in conceptual history, but also for those who study 'modern' figures, such as Leibniz or Hegel, whose idioms were impregnated with scholastic terminology. One of the great interests of the Dictionary is to show that philosophical terms are embedded in semantic histories that haunt them, and which remain a constant resource of philosophical invention.

Whilst organised by a powerful 'horizontal' historical-semantic architecture (displayed by numerous cross-references from term to term), its 'vertical' architecture is much less convincing. What is undone and 'deterritorialized' (xix) in the course of the 'word-based' analysis is paradoxically reinstantiated in 'methodological' entries. Indeed, a number of these entries pertain to national languages (French, German, Russian, etc) with the objective of *thematising* 'European' linguistic differences. But is this possible at all? These entries are not only written from a French perspective (and thus posing obvious difficulties for their translations into other languages), but as their English-language editors remark (xiii) they also contain a number of outworn clichés that will make some of the readers' teeth grind. In the article devoted to Portuguese language for example, we learn that 'in this language, concepts are never columns of cold, white, eternal marble; instead, they are curves sensually shaped in soapstone […]' (810). Whereas entries on Latin, Greek, French, German and English terms are abundant, rich and highly specialised at the same time, other entries, such as those in Russian or Portuguese are more limited and might disappoint those who are proficient in them. In spite of its claim to 'map out European differences', the Dictionary is centred on the axes that have made the European philosophical tradition such a dense and complex (but also dominant) field of references. Under the rubric 'Other Languages' the Basque, Dutch, Danish, Romanian, Portuguese, Catalan terms provide articles which are not so much structured by the history of philosophy as by their difference to other terms of the 'mainstream' tradition; French, as Cassin (2009) admits, functioning as its 'metalanguage'. Already repeatedly criticized by its American editors, Alain Badiou's trumpeting article on the universal character of 'French language' is a perfect illustration of the still powerful –albeit monological- discourse of French exceptionalism.

Therefore, what poses the most obvious difficulties concerns the political overtones of the *Dictionary* as a whole, starting with its claim to reframe a story whose main parts were played by Greek, Latin, German and French into a more 'transversal' European scenario. There is an obvious gap between the contributors' expertise in the history of philosophy and Cassin's overarching project of decentring – deconstructing? - philosophy through insisting on linguistic *difference*. Although concepts are envisaged as processes of successive differentiation and specification and therefore in their transience, these trajectories are often not risked beyond Heidegger and his own *summa* of the philosophical tradition. Incapable of destroying the bedrock of its own *authority*, philosophy can only *reformulate* the canon. The Dictionary thus raises important questions on the nature and scope of philosophy, if declarations of intention to 'open up' philosophy beyond its Eurocentric history were to be accompanied by acts.

It took several years for the five translators and the three editors (Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, Michael Wood) to complete the translation of this monumental volume and it is overall an admirable achievement. As Apter states, translating a book about 'untranslatables' was a paradoxical endeavour, which constantly revealed extra and even 'meta' layers of untranslatability. She observes that '[o]nce English intervened at the level of translating a French translation of German one could say that 'Meta' untranslatability reared its head, which is to say, an interference at the level of translating unforeseen

by the article's author and at odds with her or his argument about a given term's untranslatability in a specific linguistic context.'(xii) In light of this increased complexity certain choices in adapting the dictionary to the Anglophone public are questionable. The majority of the initially *French* 'untranslatables' have been turned into their English counterparts, thus raising further problems on the nature of so-called 'untranslatability'. At the formal level, one might also regret the simplification of the multiple indexes provided in the French edition (proper names, cited authors, words, translators) into a single one, which reduces the potential 'paths' for using the Dictionary. Indeed, the strength of this uncommon reference tool is precisely to encourage transversal and creative uses, through thematic and semantic association. In order to accommodate its Anglo-American readership, the editorial team has embarked on a light completion of the project on the basis of what constitutes contemporary literary (and comparative literature) *theory* (xi). Although admitting some arbitrariness to their decision, they added what they considered to be missing entries on media theory, gender studies and postcolonialism. Whilst this reflects their critical positioning towards the limitations and French-centred character of the original with interventions by Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak and Souleymane Bachir Diagne among others, the superposition of distinct referential (and thus political) orientations obscures the fact that the *Vocabulaire* has been moulded by historians of European philosophy with no claim to the 'global' as such.

At the same time, Cassin sustains that the *Dictionary* is not a finished work but an ongoing process, welcoming unexpected transformations. This book is demanding on its reader and it clearly calls for a form of transmission of a different kind than most academic works. Whether we can design ways of bringing this type of intense philosophical-historical work outside of the well-trodden paths of the Franco-German and Franco-English exchanges, however, will not be solved through a few *addenda*, but points to the difficult project lying in the hands of the next generations. Nevertheless, the *Dictionary of Untranslatabes* is made to last. In the present economy of publishing and so-called 'knowledge-production', this book is a rare exemplar of 'slow science': collaborative and plurivocal, it draws on life-long philosophical and historical researches, thus constituting an indispensable resource for all those who will take the time to dive into its many folds.

Lucie Mercier (lu6mer@gmail.com) is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP), Kingston University, London. Completed in 2015, her PhD thesis, 'The Inside Passage : Translation as Method and Relation in Serres and Benjamin' is an inquiry into the concept of translation linking up contemporary problematics tied to the politics of knowledge in globalisation to Walter Benjamin's philosophy and Michel Serres's early works.

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